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Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program

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Natural Heritage Areas Registry

The Natural Heritage Areas Registry has been established to encourage and facilitate cost effective voluntary protection of rare species habitat and exemplary natural communities on publicly owned (federal, state, and local) land in the Commonwealth.

Who Operates the Registry?

The Registry is a project of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's Natural Heritage Program. The Natural Heritage Program continuously gathers and updates information on the location and status of vulnerable plant and animal species and natural communities throughout the Commonwealth. The Program's data base currently includes about 3600 rare species and community records. Protection priorities are established, and adjusted, as new information comes to light through ongoing fieldwork and research, and as the statuses of species statewide, or of specific sites, change.

Objectives of the Natural Heritage Areas Registry

- To notify Public Agency land owners and managers of the rare species and natural community types located on their properties and to explain the ecological importance of the sites which provide habitat for these species.
- To reduce the chances of rare species habitat or natural communities on public lands being unknowingly destroyed.
- To provide information and assistance to Public Agency land managers regarding habitat management.
- To work with Field staff or representatives of other Public Agencies to safeguard occurrences of rare species on their land.
- To recognize Public Agencies for their commitment to protect ecologically important areas and the rare species which inhabit them.

Which Lands are Eligible for Inclusion in the Natural Heritage Areas Registry?

Properties eligible for the Registry include publicly owned federal, state, and local lands and must contain either of these natural values:

1) habitat for rare or endangered plants or animals or

2) outstanding natural communities of native plants or animals.

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How Does the Registry Operate?

Utilizing information in the Natural Heritage Program's data base, publicly owned lands which contain rare species sites and important natural communities are identified. Natural Heritage Program staff contact Public Agency land owners to notify them of the rare species located on their land and meet with them to provide more information about the rare species and the Registry, and to answer any questions.

When a site is registered, only discrete areas of ecological importance are included, rather than the entire property. The decision to register a site is entirely up to the Public Agency owning the property. The Registry represents a voluntary, non-regulatory agreement between the Public Agency and the Natural Heritage Program to protect rare species habitat.

What Does the Registry Offer Public Agency Land Owners?

When a Public Agency decides to register their property, the Natural Heritage Program prepares an information package for the ecologically important sites within the Agency's property. The information package includes the common and scientific names of rare species currently on their land, the ecological significance of the site or sites, feasible suggestions for habitat management, a map showing the locations of rare species habitat, and fact sheets outlining the description, habitat, range, and population status for each of the rare species located on the property.

In addition, an Agency may receive more detailed habitat management advice or assistance, if they wish. Information regarding historical occurrences of rare species on their land can also be provided. Each year the Natural Heritage Program will contact the Agency to determine whether the condition of the plants, animals, or natural community has changed over the past year, to learn of any habitat disturbance that may have occurred or developed within this time, and to give any advice the Agency may request.

Most importantly, the Registry offers Public Agencies the opportunity, as well as the necessary assistance, to contribute directly to the protection of ecologically significant natural areas, critical to the conservation of biological diversity in Massachusetts.

What Commitment Does a Public Agency Make in Registering their Property?

In accepting registration of their property, Public Agencies agree to:

1) Protect the rare species habitat or natural community located on their property to the best of their abilities;
2) Notify the Natural Heritage Program of planned land use changes and any habitat disturbances that might threaten the area;
3) Notify the Natural Heritage Program of any intent to sell or transfer ownership of the property.